

The Theory Drop  
The Theory Drop  
The Theory Drop  
The Theory Drop  
The Theory Drop  
The Theory Drop  
The Theory Drop  
The Theory Drop

# Clay Shirky

**Clay Shirky's book, *Here Comes Everybody*, is about the emancipatory power of the internet. Mark Dixon stage dives into the audience, to see what's changed since the emergence of 'web 2.0'.**

Shirky's ideas and writing came to prominence in the late noughties, with his chirpily titled *Here Comes Everybody* published in 2009 and *Cognitive Surplus* hitting the bookshelves in 2010. Shirky was, first and foremost, a technology guru: a leading journalist for *Wired* magazine, which, in the 1990s and early 2000s, was the go-to publication if you wanted to keep pace with the rapidly changing nature of the technology landscape.

Shirky was fortunate enough to be writing about technology when the internet (as we know it) was in its infancy: a time when most commentators viewed the stumbling first steps of web 2.0 as an inoffensively cute force that could do no harm. The World Wide Web was a digital utopia of grassroots making and

sharing that was free of big business conglomerate influence!

Shirky, in many ways, exemplifies that optimism, giving us a rose-tinted assessment that embraced the potential for fast data transmission to generate solely positive effects. The technological advancements of the late 1990s, Shirky argued, were akin to the publishing revolution brought about by Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the late 15th century: an invention that gave ordinary citizens the means to print books and pamphlets that challenged the all-powerful religious authorities of the late mediaeval period.

The Web 2.0 rollout of the late 1990s and early 2000s, Shirky argues, had a similarly profound effect, enabling ordinary people to carry out activities that were once the preserve of mass media producers. In the age of mass media, Shirky writes,

**We were like children, sitting quietly at the edge of a circle... consuming whatever the grown-ups in the centre of the circle produced.**

The digital age turned passive consumption into active participation, Shirky tells us: audiences were suddenly given the tools to speak to one another as well as the means to author their own mass media messaging. The baby web was also revolutionary in that it gave consumers the power to tell their mass-media-techno overlords what they really thought of the stuff they read, watched, or listened to. Audiences could finally feed back, engaging in two-way conversations with those who authored media texts. More importantly, media makers quickly realised that they had to listen to what their audiences said, or they faced orchestrated boycotts of their products.

Shirky tells us that this media revolution has given voice to a wider variety of producers making the contemporary media landscape more diverse than ever.

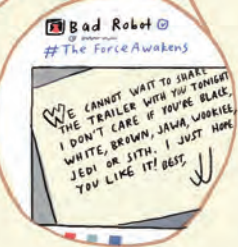
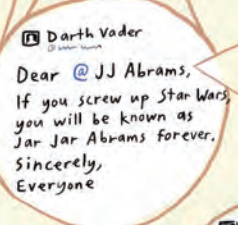




IN 1977, WE WERE WAITING PATIENTLY IN LINE...



BUT BY 2015, THE FORCE HAD AWAKENED!





What enabled that shift from passive consumption to active participation to occur? Well, Shirky tells us that the passive consumption traits of the mass media before the digital revolution existed because of technology barriers. Mass communications technologies of the period (radio, television, cinema and print publishers) might have enabled a one-to-many communications relationship, but the costs needed to operate their production processes (studios, television transmitters, printing presses and so on) restricted their use to wealthy conglomerates and established media organisations that effected financial might.

Shirky too draws attention to what he calls the personal communications technologies of the pre-digital era (telephones, fax machines and so on). Such technologies were widely available and allowed their owners to engage in two-way communications, but, importantly, only on a one-to-one basis.

Crucially, the rollout of web 2.0 converged those two technology types, blurring their mass/personal communications functions, and, in so doing, dissolving the barriers that ordinary folk faced if they wanted to communicate with a mass audience. Smartphone technologies, for example, allow their owners to engage in both personal and mass communication effects. Those technologies allow us to send and receive phone calls – thus exemplifying the traditional one-to-one personal communications of old, but today’s mobile phones also allow us to simulate the one-to-many effects of mass media when we use them to publish social media posts that appear on TikTok and so on.

The digital revolution has also blurred the relationships that traditional media authors construct with their audiences, with mass media producers now routinely simulating a range of personal communications effects. The websites and apps of most news brands, for example, routinely incorporate two-way communications functionality, giving audiences opportunities to talk back to makers via comments systems and reader upload features. Such is the

Contemporary audiences have an expectation that all mass media products include some form of two-way communications functionality.

impact of the digital revolution, Shirky tells us, that contemporary audiences have an expectation that all mass media products include some form of two-way communications functionality. As a result, those producers who do not enable visible audience feedback systems are likely to fail, he argues.

This convergence of communications technologies, Shirky argues, has undoubtedly democratised the media landscape while also encouraging increased interconnectivity. He points to the YouTuber revolution, for example, where amateur content now cultivates mass audience interest, with low tech producers marshalling views for their uploads that more than rival the one-to-many effects of established broadcasters. Shirky tells us that this media revolution has given voice to a wider variety of producers making the contemporary media landscape more diverse than ever.

Shirky, too, points to the experimental capacities of digital media output, arguing that the relative ease and cheapness of digital production means that ordinary producers are

more likely to experiment with ideas and content. YouTubers, for example, can make, edit and publish material relatively quickly. Once published, if those ideas fail to attract audiences, they haven’t lost a great deal in terms of production costs or time. In contrast, the high production costs of traditional mass media broadcasters result in a filter first/publish later production model so that output can be quality assured. This quality first production model traditionally helped mass media producers of old to ensure that their work engaged mass audience interest and could thus recoup the huge investments needed to maintain their production facilities.

The speed and cheapness of digital content production, conversely, lends itself to a publish first/filter later model where ideas that are unsuccessful or problematic are simply deleted or abandoned completely. Certainly, a great deal of evidence exists to suggest that YouTubers, for example, adapt quickly to user demands, or, in some instances, completely reinvent themselves whenever their brand identity has been tainted. The fan fallout from Zoella’s over-priced advert calendar, for example, was limited when she shifted content direction afterwards and used a completely new website to promote a more mature version of herself.



Mark Dixon is a senior examiner for A Level Media Studies and author of *Media Theory for A Level and Essential Revision for A Level Film Studies*. Follow him on Twitter @markdixonmedia or check out the resources on his website [www.essentialmediatheory.com](http://www.essentialmediatheory.com).